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AUTHOR Lockwood, Anne Turnbaugh
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ABSTRACT

Martin Sanchez Jankowski conducted a 10-year study of gangs of varying ethnicity in three major cities, with a focus on New York City and Los Angeles (California). The center of his research has been in low-income areas, where gangs have been an institution for more than 150 years. Jankowski acquired experience by living with gangs from a variety of ethnic groups, including Mexican American, Salvadoran, Nicaraguan, African American, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Jamaican, and Irish gangs. Gangs, Jankowski reports, are an organizational response to inequality and poverty that act in an entrepreneurial manner, with business relationships. While gangs frequently engage in criminal activities, crime is not the central issue. Schools are better advised to try to work with gangs to relieve criminal behavior than to try to get rid of gangs. Trying to eradicate gangs is a waste of energy, but schools can provide a long-term alternative for the best and brightest gang members. A major contribution would be a good jobs program, with cutting-edge vocational education and good job placement services. No other school effort has as great a chance of success. (Contains 11 references.) (SLD)

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THE PROFESSOR OF GANGS

ANNE TURNBAUGH LOCKWOOD

Why have gangs persisted in American society? Is there a picture of youth in gangs that the public commonly does not see? What can school staff do about youth in gangs? To gain insight into these and other questions, we talked to Martín Sánchez Jankowski, Associate Professor of Sociology and Chair of the Chicano/Latino Policy Project of the Institute for the Study of Social Change at the University of California—Berkeley. Jankowski, a former high school teacher, lived with and studied 37 gangs in Los Angeles, New York City and Boston for ten years. The full description of his research and findings is reported in his book: Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society *(University of California Press, 1991).*

The magnitude and scope of Martín Sánchez Jankowski's research is stunning: a ten-year study—in which he lived with 37 gangs of varying ethnicity in three major U.S. cities. Jankowski, who has an affable and informal manner that belies the intensity of his efforts, believes that the reasons that underpin his research—as well as his main research questions—are understood best when grounded in the broader context of his research agenda.

He explains that the focus of his research is low-income areas; the ten-year study of gangs grew out of earlier research on ethnicity and the political process. While conducting that research, he was struck by the persistence of gangs in American society.

"Clearly the gang had been a very stable institution in low-income areas in the U.S. for more than a hundred and fifty years," he begins. "In order to further understand low-income areas, I decided one had to understand the gangs, because they are an institution in low-income areas."

He began by evaluating the research that had been conducted on gangs. "I noticed that most people used police statistics, or aggregated data from various law enforcement agencies, or even from school districts. They also interviewed gang members and asked them to recreate what their lives had been like and what they thought about things.

"I thought the only way to complement that aggregate data that we had from other sources, as well as find out the dynamics by which things occurred, was to create research that did something different."

Something different. Jankowski says, was to live with gangs—literally—and conduct participant observation of their members. "I would have the intimacy I would need," he notes, "and would be able to systematically record patterns in order to understand the dynamics by which gangs operate in society."

Since most researchers had studied a single city and/or a single ethnic group, Jankowski decided to study multiple cities and multiple ethnic groups to discover what was unique about an ethnic group or a city and what was simply part of a general pattern. And although he initially wanted to conduct his research in four cities—New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Detroit—he ultimately focused primarily on Los Angeles and New York. His reasons were careful methodological ones.

"I picked Los Angeles and New York City because they had gangs for a very long time," he explains, "and they had different ethnic groups. That is, there are a number of ethnic groups in New York that aren't in L.A., and vice versa."

Living with Gangs: The Beginning

How did Jankowski gain access to the gangs with which he wanted to live? He explains that he selected a number of geographic areas in the two cities that had differing ethnic compositions, and then obtained a list of gangs from the police department and a social service agency that operated in the district. After randomly selecting a gang name, he would visit the area to pay a call at a church or social service agency that interacted with gangs. The purpose of his visit was to request an introduction to the gang in the area.

"On all accounts they consented to introduce me to the gang," he remembers. "I would tell the gang members that I was a professor and I wanted to write a book about gangs. I told them that I wanted to live with them a hundred percent of the time."

Their consent to his proposition was never immediate, he says, but after a

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few weeks they typically responded. Jankowski acquired a variety of ethnic groups in his sample: Mexican-American, Salvadoran, Nicaraguan, African American, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Jamaican, and Irish.

Interestingly, Italians invariably refused to participate in the study. Asians also refused, but their refusal was mitigated when Jankowski later gained some access to them.

Since it was crucial to his plan that he include Caucasian participants, he labored to gain the consent of Irish gangs. "The Irish in New York said no, so as a strategy to get Irish gangs, I went to Boston and tried to make a deal. The Boston gangs were more receptive, and said yes.

"Some months later, the Irish gangs in New York that had initially refused got back to me and consented. That was a very important part of the study," he emphasizes, "because white gangs had been a part of American urban life for a hundred and fifty years. I didn't want to give the impression that we're really talking about a non-white phenomenon that had died off."

Joining the Gangs

Why would gang members consent to becoming part of a research project? Jankowski explains the successful strategy that he used.

"I started this in 1976 and 1977, and at the time not many people were willing to do this kind of work. One of my hooks at the time—which would not work today—was that I told the New York gangs that I wanted to do a comparative study with L.A., and I would share with them what I found out about the L.A. gangs. They thought that was very interesting, and it was one of the reasons they consented to it in the first place."

He then went to Los Angeles and told the gangs exactly what he had told the New York gangs. "This strategy wouldn't work today," he comments, "because there has been more migration back and forth between those two cities. But it worked in 1976, 1977, and 1978."

When Jankowski first began living with the gangs, he was invariably challenged by them. "First they would try to find out if I was a police plant, and they would do illegal things to see if I went to the police. Second, they would start a fight with me to see if I could actually fight."

But he was prepared. "I knew all these things were going to happen, because I had grown up in a tough area in Detroit, with gangs, and I knew what to expect. It was okay to fight and lose, but it was not okay *not* to fight. I knew that, too, and while it was never pleasant knowing this was going to happen, I did it."

Although Jankowski was willing to fight, he set clear limits on other gang activities. "My deal with them was that I wouldn't tell on another gang in the same city. I wouldn't be involved in selling drugs, and I wouldn't be involved in drive-by shootings."

While he lived with the gangs, he witnessed criminal activity. Did that present any moral or ethical dilemma for him? "There are a lot of moral dilemmas," he replies, "but the overall moral dilemma, no. I think you have to answer that question before you go into the field. People who don't answer that question are naive, and maybe not as ethical as they should be. You have to ask yourself: What am I prepared to do, and what am I not prepared to do? After all, there are legal ramifications. When you see or hear something, you can't say you didn't hear or see it. As simple as that sounds, it's a big deal.

"There are touchy situations, yes. And there are situations for which you can't completely plan. But that's why you have to answer the overall question first, because there will always be a situation that you can't totally calculate."

He presents another side to the ethical dilemma such research can present. "You can't ethically say to somebody, 'I'm going to be a part of you,' and then rat on them. I was asking them to share their lives and their thoughts so that I could actually make a difference to their lives in a more positive way by making people understand."

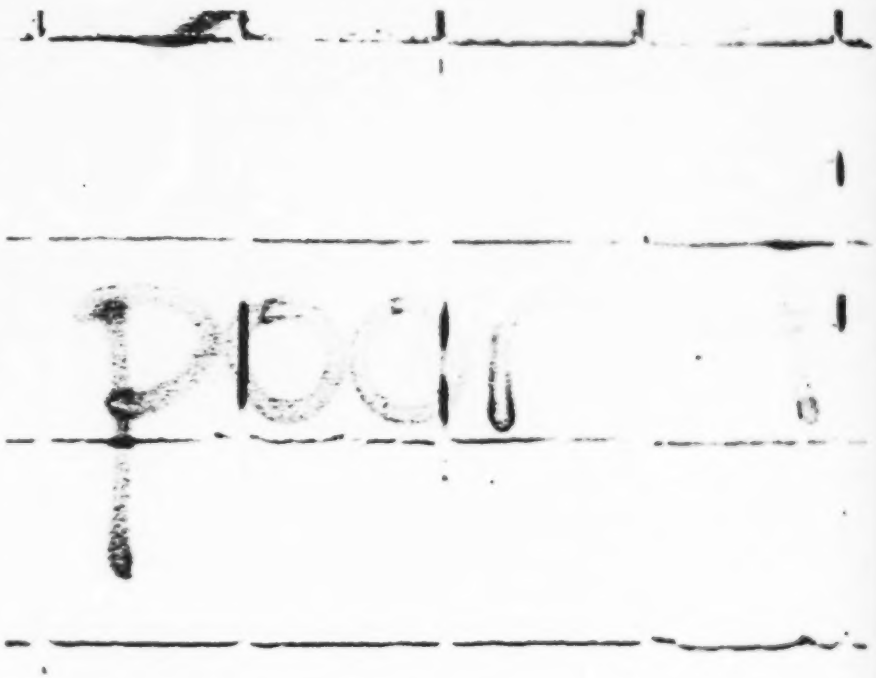
What Is A Gang?

Jankowski carefully defines a gang in his book—at some length—and underscores the importance of separating the gang as an entity from other organizational phenomena. "Any kind of grouping could be considered a gang, and I don't think that's very accurate sociologically. That's one of my criticisms of the literature on gangs to this point. They confuse groups involved in criminal behavior with gangs. That's simply not very accurate.

"Many people have not been interested in the gang as an organizational unit within a low-income area. They have been interested only in the collective outcome of this kind of behavior, which they call crime or delinquency. They use the gangs as one of the variables to explain the behavior."

But Jankowski vehemently disagrees with this approach. "I am trying to explain the gang, not crime and delinquency. My two big questions were: Why have gangs existed in America for more than one hundred and fifty years despite all the efforts and material resources we have poured into eradicating them? And: Why do some gangs rise and thrive while others decline and die?"

Although his research looks at the gang as an institution, it does not deny that gangs frequently engage in criminal acts, he says. "I try to show how crime either facilitates or doesn't facilitate the life of the gang as an organization, not the other way around."



What Can School Staff Do?

Jankowski is sensitive to the ramifications of gang presence in schools. "Before I went to graduate school, I returned to Detroit and taught in junior high and high school," he says, "so I speak from some experience of being on the front lines of education."

He professes admiration for public school educators. "It's a very tough job, and a lot of dedicated people out there are doing it. I respect them a great deal for this, because they not only teach but they have to patrol, which is not easy."

School staff can begin to deal effectively with gangs by conducting some basic research on gangs in their area. "It's always good to know what gangs operate in one's area, and who in fact might be in them. This type of reconnaissance is done in L.A. many times in the schools."

Sharing that information with other school staff can result in some strategic plans that are geared to dilute the collective power of the group. "Passing that information along can allow staff to disperse groupings of students so that they don't actually come in contact with each other. This is especially done during noon hour, during lunch time, during any kind of recess time.

"When one sees groupings in the school, it is good to have an authority figure around who either disperses the groups or is constantly there so there is a presence that tells the groups that someone is ready to take immediate action if things get out of hand."

Another strategy that can work, he says, is separating individuals. "Isolating individuals is very strategic, and can be done more easily at the junior high level than the senior high level. But that becomes quite important as well."

A different strategy is to engage school staff in an ongoing dialogue and negotiation with gangs. "Some schools get into a dialogue with gangs. That is, they don't deny there are gangs; they try to work with them. They identify who the gangs are, who the leaders are, and then hold weekly meetings to see what issues need to be resolved, to find out what kinds of mutual things the gangs are interested in doing, such as social events they might want to sponsor together. They may have a picnic or a dance with the clear understanding that they are responsible for maintaining control, or these kinds of activities won't be offered anymore."

But Jankowski doesn't shy away from stronger actions. "There will be times when things get out of hand," he admits. "School officials need to call in whatever kind of force that they have at their disposal as deterrents. They can inadvertently encourage recruitment in gangs if they can't provide protection, because if somebody who is not in a gang is hurt, then the message is: Unless you join one of the gangs you won't be protected."

Understanding vs. Eradication

Jankowski concurs with McCathern [*see first article*] that gangs will not disappear. "There's no reason to try to eradicate gangs because you're not going to be able to do it," he remarks. "Gangs are an organizational response to inequality and poverty. They have become even more so than previously, and they have more people staying in them for longer periods of time.

"They're basically quasi-capitalist organizations, so they will act in an entrepreneurial manner; they will have business relationships such as selling products and making deals. Trying to eradicate gangs is a waste of energy."

Instead, Jankowski looks to schools to provide a long-term alternative for the best and the brightest gang members. "Dumb gang members make dumb moves; dumb moves are easily controlled," he points out. "The smart members are the ones who give us trouble.

"We need to compete for the smart

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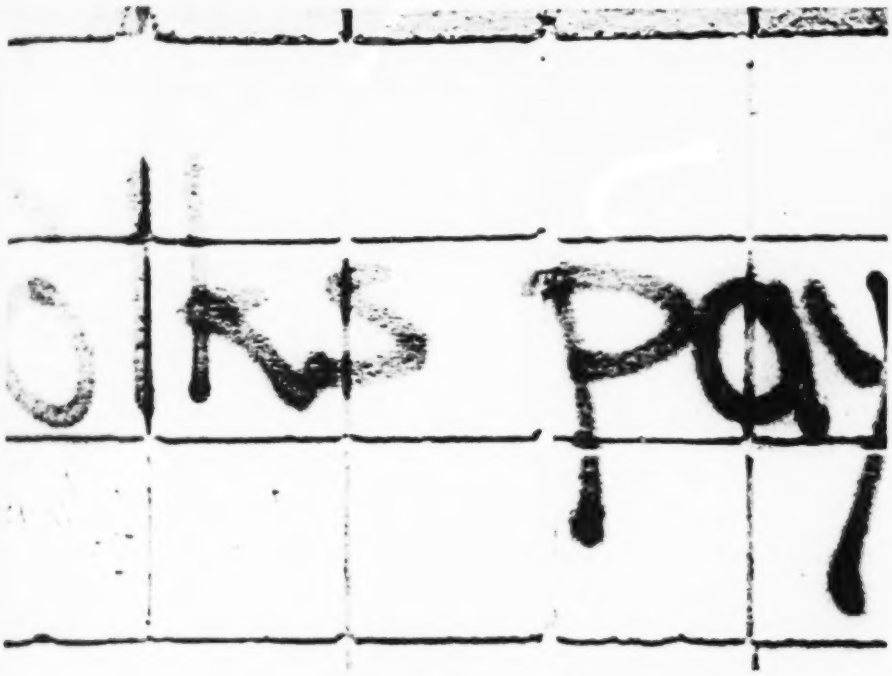

gang members, and I'm perfectly willing to concede that we will not be able to win everybody over. But we should try, and we haven't."

In fact, the single principle that he wants to impress upon educators is the contribution they could make toward creating a good jobs program. Such a program, he believes, would have long-lasting effects.

"We do not have a good jobs program, and I don't mean the jobs at McDonald's," he says. "And a lot of the vocational training offered by schools is twenty years old. People are being trained for jobs that don't exist anymore. Even the kids know that it's not training they're getting; it's just control for a certain time of the day."

Jankowski believes that a cutting-edge vocational education program in schools—coupled with good school-based placement services—would be effective in winning many intelligent gang members back into mainstream society. Such a program would also benefit non-gang members.

"A lot of money needs to be poured into revamping the career options that face inner-city kids," he says. "Schools have limited resources, but they need to hire people who know what private enterprise is now doing and what it will need. There is no sense training our children for things we don't need."

He points to college preparatory programs as proof that schools have been able to integrate new curricular and instructional advances into math, reading, and analytic skills. "We can do the same thing for the people who are not going on to college. We need to have competent people to teach them, and that means that teachers may have to be retrained for the kinds of skills they need to teach kids what private enterprise now wants or will need.

"And we may train them for the best jobs, but we have no placement services in the schools. Kids can't be trained for something and then just left to fend for themselves. It doesn't help if you get trained and you can't be placed."

To make his point, he compares the career track facing an unaided high school graduate with that facing an equally unassisted new Ph.D. in sociology. "If we were able to train Ph.D.'s at the University of California and we couldn't place them, our program would be dead in about three to five years. That needs to be said to the public schools as well. It's been a weak link in most of our planning, and I think it's really necessary.

"If we did these things, if kids then messed up with gangs they would forfeit their privilege to remain in this program. We would be able to hold down a lot of violence and a lot of other crime. And the other positive factor is that we would have productive people, paying their taxes, raising their families, and doing their jobs."

Training youth for well-salaried jobs that they could obtain upon high school graduation does not mean that all gang members have high incomes derived from criminal activity, Jankowski maintains. "There's a lot of misinformation about how much money gang members make," he points out. "Their income can range from a lot of money to not very much at all."

Why Join Gangs?

So why do youth join gangs, if not for the economic incentives they can derive from membership? Jankowski's reply is carefully reasoned. "They join for the same reason that, in the outside world, there are a lot of people who make a lot of money and a lot of people who don't make so much money. The people who don't make so much money think they can make a lot of money if they get a little luck and they do the right thing.

"It's the same hook that operates for others in mainstream society. We have to understand that we're talking about competing with a parallel economy, an economy that has pegs in it. You

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can move up in the order, or you can move down in the order. This economy looks like the economy that we call legal."

Jankowski emphasizes that the work ethic that motivates people who do not join gangs works similarly for those who do join gangs. "We fail to understand that even if gang members are not making a lot of money, the lure is still there to work really hard, to work themselves up in the organization, to make a deal here and there, and then a person might become that big-time roller in the same way that I think I might be able to be secretary of HUD of whatever. That may never happen, but we'll probably go about the tasks to see if may work."

What Doesn't Work?

Given the force of his recommendations for school staff, does he have equally forceful opinions about unsuccessful strategies at the school level? "There are some things that we always revert to," he replies. "We think we can encourage good family life, which is not something the school staff does, because they don't have any control over that." He also dismisses efforts to build youths' positive self-image.

"That just does not work," he says flatly. "That is not what the issue is about. You get a positive self-image of yourself if you think you're doing something worthwhile. A lot of that has to do with getting a job, making some money, and buying what you think you would like to buy.

"A lot of times staff identify individuals who do not have a positive self-image. It's not necessarily that these individuals do not like themselves. They do not like themselves in the place they occupy in society. And that's different. Somebody might even say, 'I like myself. I just don't like where I am.'"

Returning to his belief that schools must fill in a crucial chink of a good jobs program for youth, Jankowski tells a story. "I went to the California Youth Authority, which is an institution for young people under the age of eighteen who are incarcerated, to give a talk. I started to talk about gangs, but I told the person who was in charge of the talk that the kids didn't want to hear about gangs. Most of them were already in gangs.

"Almost all of them were asleep. They were asleep until I told them that the project that I run has a lot of contact with people who are looking for people who can work with them. I told them, 'I am leaving my card. When you get out of here, call me if you want some help finding a job.'

"What's so remarkable is that every single one of them got back up in their chairs, perked up, opened their eyes, and even asked questions. That confirmed everything that I have been trying to tell people for the longest period of time. Kids want jobs, not nowhere jobs, but jobs. School districts have to realize that they've got to prepare kids for getting good jobs."

Jankowski acknowledges that school districts are not totally accountable for the lack of a good jobs program. "Schools have had resource problems, but they need to rethink their resources," he concludes. "They need to rethink their concept of vocational education. They have to rethink who they hire to train people. Are these staff keeping up with the latest information? They've got to have resource people who know what is happening currently, so that we're training people for the future. And they must have staff who handle placement, who work very hard to place people in good jobs with a future."

FOR FURTHER READING...

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